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First section

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1. Meeting the predator

Try to look a crocodile in that eye hovering just above the waterline of the swamp. Do you detect recognition of your humanity there? You are a matter of indifference to it when it is full, a prey to be devoured when it is hungry. The eye of the crocodile is a Jobian metaphor for the world, not the only one, but one, perhaps that deserves more attention from those who demand that 'god' or 'nature' be designed for them and them alone.

William E. Connolly, 'Voices from the whirlwind' in Jane Bennett and William Chaloupka eds. *In the nature of things* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1993, p. 205).

No matter how long the log lies in the river, it will never become a crocodile.

African Proverb

My story begins and ends in tropical northern Australia, in the Stone Country of Arnhem Land. This is a land of stone sculpted by sky, wind and water to immense, fantastic forms. The abrasive power of the dry season winds is matched by the erosive power of the wet season storms whose rains pound the land from December to April.

Shrouded stone figures and great sandstone heads gaze out over country formed by a thousand million years of vigorous marital struggle between mother earth and father sky. The energy of that struggle, amorous perhaps as well as abrasive, between the sandstone sheet and the hot, hyperactive atmosphere, has ground the great stone plateau into strange, maze-like ruins, ever-new disclosures of the infinite variety of the earth narrative that is weathered stone.

Stone, wind and water in collaboration shape this land. The power of the Stone Country is manifest in the estuary below, in the extreme annual flooding so crucial for the ecology of the Kakadu region. For the human cultures who lived in the fertile estuary of the East Alligator and other rivers fed by the Stone Country, cultures that had a deeply nourishing relationship with their country, it was a place abundant in food and natural beauty, but where the human had to situate itself in relation to many other powerful forces and elements. It is Ngalyod, the Rainbow Serpent, who holds the power of water, the key to life in this environment. Her water cycles are majestic and creative. As the wet season rainbow arches across the sky, Ngalyod recycles life in this place and performs the yearly integration of land, sky and water.

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I suppose I have always been the sort of person who 'goes too far'. I certainly went much too far that torrential wet season day in February 1985 when I paddled my little red canoe to the point where the East Alligator River surges out of the Stone Country of the Arnhem Land Plateau. It was the wrong place to be on the first day of the monsoon, when Lightning Man throws the rainbow across the sky and heavy rains begin to lash the land. The rains, pouring off thousands of square miles of sandstone plateau, unleash huge seasonal floods that sweep downriver and submerge for the next half-year the low-lying country on the flood-plain below. It was in this place, as the gushing rain squalls reunited earth and sky, I had a close encounter with a crocodile. My saurian teacher was a wrestling master and a far better judge than I of my incautious character, the precarious nature of human life, and of various other things I needed to know and have striven to pass onto others.

It is not a minor or inessential feature of our human existence that we are food: juicy, nourishing bodies. Yet, as I looked into the eye of the crocodile, I realised that my planning for this journey upriver had given insufficient attention to this important aspect of human life, to my own vulnerability as an edible, animal being. This was the country of the largest of the living crocodiles, a close relative of the ancient dinosaurs, the Estuarine or Saltwater Crocodile. Not long ago saltwater crocodiles were considered endangered, as virtually all mature animals were shot out of the rivers and lakes of Australia's north by commercial hunting. But after more than a decade of protection, their numbers were beginning to burgeon. The saltwater crocodile is a predator of humans from the distant past, a creature that can move so fast it appears to the human eye as a flash. It was hard for me to judge the size of the one that had attacked and pursued my canoe and now fixed its gaze on mine, for all of it except the head was under the murky water, but it was clear that I aroused intense interest. I now know that an animal that can give its intended prey a misleading impression of its size, can also help them to a less misleading sense of who and what they are.

Of course, in some very remote and abstract way, I knew it happened, knew that humans were animals and were sometimes—very rarely—eaten like other animals. I knew I was food for crocodiles, that my body, like theirs, was made of meat. But then again in some very important way, I did *not* know it, absolutely rejected it. Somehow, the fact of being food for others had not seemed real, not in the way it did now, as I stood in my canoe in the beating rain staring down into the beautiful, gold-flecked eyes of the crocodile. Until that moment, I knew that I was food in the same remote, abstract way that I knew I was animal, was mortal. In the moment of truth, abstract knowledge becomes concrete. You gaze with dumb astonishment as your own death, known only as a shadowy, distant

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stranger, suddenly rises up right before you in terrifying, technicoloured detail and gasp in disbelief that some powerful creature can ignore your special status and try to eat you.

How had I come to make this terrible mistake about myself, my place, my body? I asked myself, with that sinking sense of serious stupidity that mars many a final moment. Was it a philosophical mistake about identity, the self as disembodied consciousness dissociated from the food-providing self as material body? Or the idea that humans are special, above and apart from other animals? I had no real opportunity to ponder the cultural genesis of my false consciousness, for at that moment the crocodile made its move, leaping from the water so fast I saw only a flash, and grabbing me painfully between the legs before pulling me down into the water. Nor did I pursue the issue later that day as I lay, terribly injured, in the path of the oncoming flood. But I have had many years since in which to think about these disastrous illusions, and to try to track them down.

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Some events can completely change your life and your work, although sometimes the extent of this change is not evident until much later. They can lead you to see the world in a completely different way, and you can never again see it as you did before. You have been to the limit, and seen the stars change their course. That extreme heightening of consciousness evoked at the point of death is, as many testify, of a most revelatory and life-changing kind—for those who, against all odds, are given a reprieve and survive. The extraordinary visions and insights that appear in those last seconds can be hard to reconcile with our normal view of the world. In the vivid intensity of those last moments, when great, toothed jaws descend upon you, it can HIT YOU LIKE A THUNDERCLAP that you were completely wrong about it all—not only about what your own personal life meant, but about what life and death themselves actually mean.

That's how it was with me, anyway. What is called the 'moment of truth' revealed the world I thought I lived in to be illusory, my own view of it terribly, shockingly mistaken. But the sense of being completely wrong about it all was much more than just being wrong about the value of my own life, and my stupidity in risking it. I don't mean self-castigation or regret, being mistaken about the immense value of your life—the intense perception as you face your end that you've been a fool in risking it, that life is much more precious than you counted it, and that you should have given its preservation much more care. The regret evoked by impending death was there, but there was something else, something much more than regret.

This was a strong sense, at the moment of being grabbed by those powerful jaws, that there was something profoundly and incredibly wrong in what was

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happening, *some sort of mistaken identity*. My disbelief was not just existential but ethical—this wasn't happening, couldn't be happening. The world was not like that! The creature was breaking the rules, was totally mistaken, utterly wrong to think I could be reduced to food. As a human being, I was so *much more than food*. It was a denial of, an insult to all I was to reduce me to food. Were all the other facets of my being to be sacrificed to this utterly undiscriminating use, was my complex organisation to be destroyed so I could be reassembled as part of this other being? With indignation as well as disbelief, I rejected this event. It was an illusion! It was not only unjust but unreal! *It couldn't be happening*.

After much later reflection, I came to see that there was another way to look at it. There was illusion alright, but it was the other way around. It was the world of 'normal experience' that was the illusion, and the newly disclosed brute world in which I was prey was, in fact, the unsuspected reality, or at least a crucial part of it. But all I saw then was the lack of fit between the experience of being prey and the framework of belief and life I took to be normality. If the framework of normality was true, the lack of fit could only be explained if this experience of being prey was an illusion, was a dream or nightmare. But if it wasn't, I had to face the possibility that the lack of fit was there because both I and the culture that shaped my consciousness were wrong, profoundly wrong—about many things, but especially about human embodiment, animality and the meaning of human life.

Sometimes ordinary experience can trick you, can be profoundly wrong, profoundly out of touch. My most recent encounter with sustained illusion occurred a few years ago on another canoe trip, this time in the far north of Canada. I came to a place on the Peel River where all the landforms I could see around me were strongly marked by parallel strata that tilted slightly upwards. Since the human eye is guided in these circumstances to take the land as its horizontal reference, I experienced a powerful and persistent illusion that we were moving across a level landscape and that the river was running very sharply downhill. But there were some things that didn't fit. The river gradient seemed very steep, but the water was placid and unhurried, without rapids. Our calm movement downriver took on a surreal, dreamlike quality, not at all unpleasant—indeed rather enchanting and liberating, as if we had somehow escaped from normal gravity and entered a parallel universe. It took some reflection on various subtle clues, the little pieces of corrective experience that did not fit, to reveal the presence of illusion and show that it was the river and not the land that was true, on the level.

The illusion revealed by the crocodile encounter was of a different, more philosophical kind, about the meaning of everyday experience. But in the same way it revealed that it was possible for people—as individuals, groups, perhaps whole cultures that subscribe to a particular dominant story—to be completely

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and systematically wrong about quite simple and basic things—our relationship to food, to one another, the intertwining of life and death, the fleshly, embodied character of human existence—and be quite unaware of it. A few people may come to see the illusion for what it is because they stumble across certain clues, experiences that do not fit the dominant story. Suppose that in the same way as the illusion that the land was on the level, the fact of being always on the 'winning side' of the predation relationship tricks us, conceals from us the real slant of things, the real measure of our animality and embodiment. Now suppose that the clue experiences that can correct the illusion become for some reason increasingly scarce—perhaps because the dominant story itself brings about their elimination! Then the illusion might go on for a very long time, might have to result in real catastrophe, before anyone realises anything is wrong. And by then the culture might be out of touch in a very big way.

That I think is what has happened to Western culture under the influence of the dominant story about our animality. For a modern human being from the first, or over-privileged world, the humbling experience of becoming food for another animal is now utterly foreign, almost unthinkable. And our dominant story, which holds that humans are different from and higher than other creatures, are made out of mind-stuff, has encouraged us to eliminate from our lives any animals that are disagreeable, inconvenient or dangerous to humans. This means, especially, animals that can prey on humans. In the absence of a more rounded form of the predation experience, we come to see predation as something we do to others, the inferior ones, but which is never done to us. We are victors and never victims, experiencing triumph but never tragedy, our true identity as minds, not as bodies. Thereby we intensify and reinforce illusions of superiority and apartness. Since the potential for more corrective and chastening forms of experience has been eliminated from normal life, there is less and less experience available of the type that can correct the illusion.

On reflection, I came eventually to see that I was subject at that moment of truth to an illusion about death and my place as a human being in the scheme of things rather similar to my illusion upon the Peel River. Confronted with the prospect of being food, my sense of who I was was profoundly out of whack, in just the same way as my perception of that piece of the Peel River. Then, it seemed as if I had entered a parallel universe in which rivers flow slowly down mountains at the same leisurely pace as they meander across the plain.

I leapt through the eye of the crocodile into what seemed also a *parallel universe*, one with completely different rules to the 'normal universe'. This harsh, unfamiliar territory was the Heraclitean universe where everything flows, where we live the other's death, die the other's life: the universe represented in the food chain. I was suddenly transformed in the parallel universe into the form of a small, edible animal whose death was of no more significance than

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that of a mouse, and as I saw myself as meat I also saw with an incredible shock that I inhabited a grim, relentless and deplorable world that would make no exceptions for me, no matter how smart I was, because like all living things, I was made of meat, was nutritious food for another being.

Later, because against the odds I survived, I could begin the process of reconciling the two universes. The parallel universe was my very own, this world of experience and embodiment in which I have always lived my life, the world that gave birth to me and has made me what I am. It was because the world in which I was meat diverged so wildly from what I saw as reality that I could not recognise it as the world of my own everyday experience, and had to adopt the 'parallel universe' fiction. But that was a measure of my delusion rather than of its departure from the real world of earthly life. It has been a great struggle for me to recognise and reconcile with this harsh world as my own. That recognition and reconciliation is what this book has to offer.

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These events provided me with rich material for reflection long after my recovery and left me with many intellectual puzzles around food and death and a strong sense of incompleteness. Why could I not see myself as food—why did it seem so wrong? In what sense was it wrong? Why was being food such a shock? What kind of shock was it? Why did I do such dangerous things and not perceive my danger? Why did I not see myself as subject to these kinds of dangers in this place? Why was I, as a critic of anthropocentrism over many years, able to harbour so many illusions about human apartness? Does this reveal my personal confusion or how deep the sense of human superiority and apartness runs in the dominant culture? Or both? I hope to lay to rest some of these questions here.

For thousands of years, Western religions and philosophies taught that the human was set apart from the animals and the rest of nature, made, unlike them, in the image of God. It was heresy to believe that any species other than humans could be saved or go to heaven, a place of sacredness and perfection reserved exclusively for human beings. God is transcendent, not material, apart from nature, and is for our species alone. Our investment in this special status remains enormous. Despite what we have learnt from Darwin, our culture has been a dismal failure at coming to terms with our inclusion in the animal and natural order, and this is a major factor behind the environmental crisis. It is no trivial matter for a culture which locates human identity outside and in opposition to the earth, in a disembodied universe even beyond materiality itself, to receive the news Darwin brought, of our descent from other animals through evolution.

The Darwinian knowledge has been accepted in some places, after a long struggle, but it has been absorbed at a very superficial, mainly intellectual level.

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It has not penetrated into other parts of our consciousness and is still at odds with the deep culture. Most of the dominant culture still resists this knowledge and some is explicitly rejectionist. Even at an intellectual level, there are all sorts of dodges for evading its egalitarian import. For example, Papal doctrine until recently, instructed us that our bodies may have evolved from other animals, but that the real basis of our humanity, our minds have not—they are god-given, and in no way comparable to those of animals. We remain special, as the real owners of the world, the pinnacle of evolution, the ultimate species for whom it was all designed and to whom it all leads.

This way of viewing the world makes it very painful to come to terms with features of conscious animality, insofar as our culture has made of it a painful contradiction—a sidereal identity in a fleshly, decaying body, thinking flesh, knowing flesh, singing flesh, flesh that knows of its own vulnerability. Being food confronts one very starkly with the realities of embodiment, with our inclusion in the animal order as food, as flesh, our kinship with those we eat, with being part of the feast and not just some sort of spectator of it, like a disembodied eye filming somebody else's feast. We are the feast. This is a humbling and very disruptive experience.

Although we may be brimming with fanciful speculation about the place of mind in the world we are still and overriding all, food like all other animals. Our ability to deny this fact and 'stand apart' is dangerously reinforced by our elimination of those to whom we are prey. My answer to this conundrum has been a philosophical one and is positioned within the theory of human/nature dualism.

I see human/nature dualism as a failing of my culture, time and history. Human/nature dualism is a Western-based cultural formation going back thousands of years that sees the essentially human as part of a radically separate order of reason, mind, or consciousness, set apart from the lower order that comprises the body, the animal and the pre-human. Inferior orders of humanity, such as women, slaves and ethnic Others (so-called 'barbarians'), partake of this lower sphere to a greater degree, through their supposedly lesser participation in reason and greater participation in lower 'animal' elements such as embodiment and emotionality. Human/nature dualism conceives the human as not only superior to but as different in kind from the non-human, which as a lower sphere exists as a mere resource for the higher human one. This ideology has been functional for Western culture in enabling it to exploit nature with less constraint, but it also creates dangerous illusions by denying embeddedness in and dependency on nature. This can be seen in our denial of human inclusion in the food web and in our response to the ecological crisis.

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Human/nature dualism is a double-sided affair, destroying the bridge between the human and the non-human from both ends, as it were, for just as the essentially human is disembodied, disembedded and discontinuous from the rest of nature, so nature and animals are seen as mindless bodies, excluded from the realms of ethics and culture. Re-envisaging ourselves as ecologically embodied beings akin to, rather than superior to, other animals is a major challenge for Western culture, as is recognising the elements of mind and culture present in animals and the non-human world. The double-sided character of human/nature dualism gives rise to two tasks that must be integrated. These are the tasks of situating human life in ecological terms and situating non-human life in ethical terms.

Although, by definition, all ecologically embodied beings exist as food for some other beings, the human supremacist culture of the West makes a strong effort to deny human ecological embodiment by denying that we humans can be positioned in the food chain in the same way as other animals. Consequently, predators of humans have been execrated and largely eliminated.

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The eye of the crocodile—the giant estuarine crocodile of northern Australia—is golden flecked, reptilian, beautiful. It has three eyelids. It appraises you coolly it seems, as if seldom impressed, as one who knows your measure. But it can also light up with an unexpectedly intense glint if you manage to engage its interest. This was the mistake I made on that day in February 1985 paddling a canoe on the backwaters.

Since then I have come to understand that the eye of the crocodile, along with the voice of the prey of the crocodile—and one cannot be understood without the other—is also a position to speak from, to think from. It is one I have found illuminating in building a philosophy that can celebrate the world in which we live with joy and understand our current relationship to the biosphere.

But it is a position increasingly shut out, eliminated from the world. To hear this voice requires seeing yourself in ecological terms, in historical–evolutionary terms. This crocodile-eye view is the view of an old eye, an appraising and critical eye that potentially judges the quality of human life and finds it wanting. Crocodiles are the voice of the deep past, covering the time span of the rise and extinction of many species. It is a voice we need to hear but it is increasingly drowned out by loud party music and noisy self-congratulation. Above all, it is drowned out by the sound of humans fighting.

The eye of the crocodile also provides us with a perspective that can help us to see ourselves in ecological terms; help us towards a theory of ourselves in thorough-going evolutionary–democratic terms, disrupting our view of ourselves as set

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apart and special. We need to respond rationally to the environmental crisis by adopting a much more ecologically democratic position. From such a viewpoint we can love fellow humans without needing to maintain an exclusionary stance towards non-humans. To date we have seen ourselves as masters of the universe. In theological times this meant seeing ourselves set apart as the single recipient of divine regard while in modern times we interpret our position as the culmination of the evolutionary endeavour.

Moving from one world to another involves a leap, not because the frameworks of ideas we must leave behind are completely discrete—indeed they may overlap considerably—but because there is a major change in the interpretations of certain keystone concepts so that theories are no longer compatible. Death, like food and being human, is one of those keystone concepts that registers change and sources of resistance to change. Narratives of death and the afterlife give important clues to concepts of ecological identity and membership of an earth community.

In that flash, when my consciousness had to know the bitter certainty of its end, I glimpsed the world for the first time 'from the outside', from outside the narrative of self, where every sentence can start with an 'I'. That story actually entails a process of what Deborah Bird Rose calls 'denarrativisation', whereby Western culture ceased to regard the world as having its own story and started to look at the world as a storyless object. The old, I now know, goes on, although it is no longer a story revolving exclusively around a human subject.

Humour is one way to maintain the 'outside' story. The disruptive and radically humbling potential of the eye of the crocodile perspective has been the basis for several very fine crocodile cartoons which poke fun at the pretences of humanity. One cartoon, by Gary Larsen, shows two large, fat green crocodiles lying on a bank rubbing their tummies appreciatively, while in the stream below floats a broken red canoe, a paddle and a solar topee. One crocodile is saying to the other, 'That was marvellous! No hair, no hooves, no hide, just white, soft and succulent'. Another shows two tourists wearing shorts and tropical gear walking past two concealed crocodiles. One crocodile is saying to the other, 'They look disgusting, but I believe they're very good for you'.

I always found the Larsen cartoon spoke powerfully to me first because I had had a red canoe, and second because I came to feel strongly that I wanted to defend the crocodile's right to eat humans who strayed into their territory. Thirdly, I appreciated how humbling a perspective was that of the crocodile, and one we now stand greatly in need of! The crocodile stands apart from the human and makes a fearless judgement which diminishes human significance. The crocodile is the purveyor of a critical view of humans which cuts us down to size, cuts through our pretensions to be a superior species above the food

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chain and figures us as just another animal, a particular kind of food, food with pretensions. Yet this important perspective or speaking position is increasingly denied cultural representation and only rarely achieves cult representation.

An understanding of ourselves as food is the subject of horror as well as humour. Horror movies and stories reflect this deep-seated dread of becoming food for other forms of life: horror is the wormy corpse, vampires sucking blood and sci-fi monsters trying to eat humans as in Alien 1 and 2. Horror and outrage usually greet stories of other species eating live or dead humans, and various levels of hysteria are elicited when we are nibbled by leeches, sandflies, and mosquitoes.

But humans *are* food, food for sharks, lions, tigers, bears and crocodiles, food for crows, snakes, vultures, pigs, rats and goannas, and for a huge variety of smaller creatures and micro-organisms. An ecological animalism would acknowledge this and affirm principles emphasising human–animal mutuality, equality and reciprocity in the food web.

All living creatures are food, and also much more than food. In a good human life we must gain our food in such a way as to acknowledge our kinship with those whom we make our food, which does not forget the more than food that every one of us is, and which positions us reciprocally as food for others. A reconceptualisation of ourselves in ecological terms has many aspects, but one of the most fundamental is to begin to think of ourselves in terms of our usefulness to the other elements of our ecosystems, in the same way as other components. One of the most basic ways is to begin to think of ourselves—humbly—as food for others.

Let us then radically revise our conception of food. Being and thinking of ourselves as of use as food for others is the most basic way in which we can re-envisage ourselves in ecological terms and affirm our solidarity with other animals in opposition to the dominant cultural conviction that we humans are set apart, too good to be food. For we are made for the other. Such a mutual use does not mean we exist for them to colonise and destroy as we have colonised and destroyed them. It is simply a re-visioning of our place in more egalitarian terms.

My disbelief about being food, of believing the human to be apart, eaters of others but never ourselves eaten, or that it is profoundly wrong has been the dominant story about human identity, a story of human hyper-separation from nature. This is an old and very powerful story which is in turn linked to our culture's approach to the problem of death.

This denial that we ourselves are food for others is reflected in many aspects of our death and burial practices. The strong coffin, conventionally buried well below the level of soil fauna activity, and the slab over the grave to prevent

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anything digging us up, keeps the Western human body (at least sufficiently affluent ones) from becoming food for other species. Sanctity is interpreted as guarding ourselves jealously and keeping ourselves apart, refusing even to conceptualise ourselves as edible, and resisting giving something back, even to the worms and the land that nurtured us.

Upon death the human essence is conventionally seen as departing for a disembodied, non-earthly realm, rather than nurturing those earth others who have nurtured us. This concept of human identity positions humans outside and above the food web, not as part of the feast in a chain of reciprocity but as external manipulators and masters separate from it. Death becomes a site for apartness, domination and individual salvation, rather than for sharing and for nurturing a community of life. Being food for other animals shakes our image of human mastery. As eaters of others who can never ourselves be eaten in turn by them or even conceive of ourselves in edible terms, we take, but do not give, justifying this one-way arrangement by the traditional Western view of the human right to use earth others as validated by an order of rational meritocracy in which humans emerge on top. Cannibalism aside, humans are not even to be conceptualised as edible not only by other humans, but by other species.

My proposal is that the food/death imaginary we have lost touch with is a key to re-imagining ourselves ecologically, as members a larger earth community of radical equality, mutual nurturance and support. Our loss of this perspective has meant the loss of humbling but important forms of knowledge, of ourselves and of our world. We can learn to look for comfort and continuity, meaning and hope in the context of the earth community, and work in this key place to displace the hierarchical and exceptionalist cultural framework that so often defeats our efforts to adapt to the planet. This involves re-imagining ourselves through concrete practices of restraint and humility, not just in vague airy–fairy concepts of unity.

Modernist liberal individualism teaches us that we own our lives and bodies: politically as an enterprise we are running and experientially as a drama we are variously narrating, writing, acting and/or reading. As hyper-individuals, we owe nothing to anybody, not to our mothers, let alone to any nebulous earth community. Exceptionalised as both species and individuals, we humans cannot be positioned in the food chain in the same way as other animals. Predation on humans is *monstrous*, exceptionalised and subject to extreme retaliation.

The Western problematic of death—where the essential self is disembodied spirit—poses a false choice of continuity, even eternity, in the realm of the spirit, versus the reductive materialist concept of death as the complete ending of the story of the material, embodied self. Both horns of this dilemma exact a terrible price, alienation from the earth in the first case and the loss of meaning and narrative continuity for self in the second.

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Indigenous animist concepts of self and death succeed in breaking this pernicious false choice and suggesting satisfying and ecologically responsive forms of continuity with and through the earth. By understanding life as in circulation, as a gift from a community of ancestors, we can see death as recycling, a flowing on into an ecological and ancestral community of origins. In place of the Western war of life against death whose battleground has been variously the spirit-identified afterlife and the reduced, medicalised material life, the Indigenous imaginary sees death as part of life, partly through narrative, and partly because death is a return to the (highly narrativised) land that nurtures life. Such a vision of death fosters an imaginary of the land as a nourishing terrain, and of death as a nurturing, material continuity with ecological others, especially the lives and landforms of country.

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Other questions came to my mind later when reflecting on my experience. Why did I do such a dangerous thing and not perceive my danger? Why did I previously not see myself as subject to these kinds of dangers? One way of answering these questions lies in my background in a certain kind of culture, my background relationship to the land I was visiting and the land of home. My relationship, in other words, to place. I was in a place that was not my own and which was very different from my own place. An important part of place is one's sense of the large predators for placing us.

Europe and North America have their wolves and bears, some of which can be a serious danger to the human species. South America and Africa have many species which make walking, camping or adventuring alone in many habitats a dangerous enterprise.

Those like myself who have grown up in the bush of Southern Australia have had our awareness of danger formed in an apparently more benign environment that lacks serious human predators. It is not that danger is lacking in the bushlands of SE Australia. In the forest where I live there are many very dangerous spiders. Snakes, including several that are among the most venomous in the world, are commonly encountered. One of the most important and subtlest dangers is fire.

When I returned home to my current abode in early December last year, the forest was frighteningly dry, there were three bushfires around me and the air was full of smoke. Then a few days later we had one of those wonderful interventions that excite this part of the coast: the Cool Change! Along these coastal ranges over the summer months we experience a great tug of war between two elements, the cool, moist maritime element from the southern oceans versus the hot, dry fire-bearing element, the fire dragon from the scorched heart of the continent. (Of course this good/bad alignment is much too simple—each side

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has its positives and negatives). In most seasons the moist maritime goddess can be counted on to win, but in drought seasons such as this one the balance is more precarious. Here, every week, the question seems to be: will we make it again this year? Will the silver goddess get here in time to expel the fire dragon? Will we survive?

The southerly change really is Cool. Water trickles steadily into my rain tanks as cool moist cloud sweeps in from the ocean through the forest. I dig out a sweater; lyrebirds are singing again; grasses greening. All the fires around me now seem to be out. The dripping forest feels good now, but I know it's not over yet until we get a lot more rain. It can all change back in a week or two of heat and drying winds into a fire powder keg. You have to be able to look at the bush you love and also imagine it as a smoking, blackened ruin, and somehow come to terms with that vision. I am trying to make my house fire-ready, but in the cool moist airstream of the moment I am finding it hard to sustain the sense of urgency and inevitability that moved my efforts a week or two ago. Now a little hope has returned that I'll be lucky and that the encounter with that particular demon can be yet again postponed. But I know I will have to meet the fire monster face-to-face one day.

Well I'm pleased to report now in mid-January that the silver goddess has won again, that the forest moisture is now very good and the fire element has been expelled—but only for the moment, and only for this local coastal mountain rainforest microclimate. Further west it's still very dry.

Not so in Kakadu which is a very different and much more dangerous environment, one in which I was to learn the agonies of the world from which my safe life in southern Australia had protected me, where the animal fate of being food is extended to the human species.

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